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ABSTRACT

Paradoxical techniques in counseling consist of directing clients to practice the symptom which is causing them psychological distress. Both impression management theory and reactance theory have been advanced to explain the efficacy of such techniques. To examine the effectiveness of paradoxical techniques according to impression management and reactance theories, students who were identified as procrastinators by a classroom pretest were asked to volunteer to participate in two interviews designed to help them decrease their procrastination. Each of these interviews contained a paradoxical directive. Approximately 2 weeks following the interviews, students were again measured for procrastination, both in the classroom, and in the presence of the interviewer who conducted the therapy sessions (Interviewer Present). Another group was measured only in the classroom situation (Interviewer Absent). A third group was measured in the classroom and given no therapeutic interviews (Control). An analysis of the results showed that all three groups decreased their procrastination behavior, although these changes were nonsignificant. The Interviewer Present group showed a decrease in procrastination when measured by the interviewer, and then a slight increase in procrastination at the final measurement. These findings tend to support impression management theory, although questions about the overall effectiveness of paradoxical techniques are raised. (BL)

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DIFFERENTIAL EFFECTIVENESS OF THEORETICAL ACCOUNTS FOR PARADOX

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Differential effectiveness of theoretical accounts for paradox

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Paradoxical techniques in counseling consist of directing clients to practice the symptom which is causing them psychological distress. (Raskin & Klein, 1976). Numerous studies have demonstrated that paradox is effective with a wide range of psychological difficulties (c.f. Fish, 1973 Gertz, 1967; Beck & Strong, 1982; Wright & Strong, 1982). However, few empirical efforts of have addressed the question of why such techniques work. A number of theories have been advanced to explain the efficacy of paradoxical techniques; prominient among these are reactance theory (Brehm, 1981; Tennen, Rohrobaugh, Press & White, 1981) and impression management theory (Strong & Claiborn, 1982, Strong, Bradford & Zodun, 1982).

Impression management theory (Strong & Claiborn, 1982; Strong, Bradford, & Zodun, 1982) postulates that individuals strive to control relationships by manipulating the impressions they make on others, and by offering feedback about how others affect them. In the therapy, situation, therapists usually present directives to clients, which, if obeyed, undermine the client's image as an independant, autonomous person. From an impression management standpoint, when the therapist gives the client a paradoxical directive, clients resist the directive in the interests of managing the impression they are creating with the therapist. That is, in order to avoid appearing controlled by the therapist, clients resist the therapist's orders to keep the symptom,

instead dropping it.

Reactance theory, on the other hand, argues that individuals have a certain range of behaviors which are considered "free" behaviors. Directives in therapy are seen by clients as threats to their behavioral freedom. When individuals perceive a threat to a behavioral freedom, they attempt to reestablish their freedom by resisting and performing the restricted behavior. In the case of paradox, the restricted behavior happens to be the absence of the symptom, and thus, the threat to behavioral freedom should evoke symptom remission.

The present study sought to compare the effectiveness of paradoxical techniques. In order to compare the two theories, students who were identified as procrastinators by a classroom pretest were asked to volunteer to participate in two interviews designed to help them decrease their procrastination. Each of these interviews contained a paradoxical directive. Approximately two weeks following the interviews, students were again measured for procrastination both in the classroom, and in the presence of the interviewer who conducted the therapy sessions (Interviewer Present). Another group was only measured in the classroom situation (Interviewer Absent). A third group was measured in the classroom and given no therapeutic interviews (Control).

Impressions management theory predicted that students measured in the presence of the interviewer would show decreased procrastination only at the interview measurement, resuming their procrastination when the need to impression manage was no longer present. Because reactance is considered to produce a more permanent change in the individual, reactance theory predicted that both groups receiving interviews would show decreased

procrastination at the posttest, and the interviewer present would also show decreased procrastination when measured by the interviewer.

(4) Subjects:

The procrastination Log (a revised version of a procrastination measure used by Wright and Strong, 1982) was given to students in a large introductory psychology section as part of large packet administered of questionnaires administered by the instructor. Students were identified who indicated that they had a serious problem with procrastination were called on the telephone and asked to participate in a study which might help them to deal with their problem. Interviewers for the study memorized a standard script in an attempt to standardize interview content. Five interviewers (three females, two males) conducted equal numbers of sessions across experimental conditions.

(5) Procedure

After subjects participants were selected through the procedures outlined above, those assigned to one of the experimental conditions were given two therapeutic interviews spaced a week apart. The content of the two sessions is summarized as follows:

Session one. In the first interview, students discussed their procrastination problems for approximately 30 to 35 minutues, with a focus on procrastination in present academic situations. Following this discussion, interviewers gave a paradoxical directive which instructed participants to procrastinate in exactly the same ways in the following week. The directive was given the rationale that students needed to learn more about their behavior before they could attempt to change it.

Session two. Session two began with a discussion of the paradoxical assignment focusing on whether the study student actually procrastinated over the previous week. Any symptom remission was attributed to

temporary, not lasting, change. The remainder of the interview was devoted to a exploration of past procrastination behavior. Near the end of the interview, a second paradoxical directive was given, almost identical to the first interview directive. Following the directive, the Interviewer Present group was asked to complete the Procrastination Log while the interviewer remained in the room.

(6) Results:

Mean procrastination log scores for participants in the three experimental groups are shown in Table 1. No significant differences were found among experimental means, which were analyzed using planned comparisons. All three groups decreased their procrastination behavior from pre to post test, although these changes were nonsignificant. Interestingly, the Interviewer Present group showed a decrease in procrastination when measured by the interviewer, and then a slight increase in procrastination at the final measurement, a finding which would tent to support impression management theory predictions.

(7) Implications and conclusions.

The results of the present study present two implications for the use of paradoxical directives in therapy. First, the paradoxical directives did not seem to be effective in decreasing participants' levels of procrastination over the course of the study. Second, the comparisons of the Interviewer Absent and Interviewer Present groups did not indicate differential effectiveness for either of the two theoretical approaches compared, although the pattern of the means tended to support impression management. While these results would tend to raise questions concerning the effectiveness of paradoxical directives in general, several other explanations of the nonsignificant findings are possible, including Type II error, subject selection factors, and error of measurement.

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(9) Tables

Table 1. Mean Procrastination Log Scores

Group	N	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
Control	10	60.40	-----	59.60
Interviewer Absent	7	61.75	-----	58.43
Interviewer Present	10	61.00	56.9	60.30